



COMING HOME

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Luke 15:11-24

First Message

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If you use a magnifying glass to examine a painting, you will notice that the area viewed through the center of the glass appears crisp and clear, but the edges are distorted. We could make the same observation about the spiritual life: it is easy to focus on godly things, religious things, but, at the same time, drift away from what is central. When we do this, we push God out to the margins of life. We lose focus. We fill our schedules with the critical things that must be done—paying bills, filling out applications, meeting with clients, taking care of the children, keeping the car running. Life can become so filled with activity, however, that an unexpected event can send us into a dither and our kingdom crumbles. When this happens, we discover that we have forgotten our first love. I confess that is where I find myself at times.

In the series which we begin today, I want to talk about the spiritual life, cultivating intimacy with God and placing him at the center of our focus. I want to tug on our hearts by having us think about our relationship with God as we explore sabbath and worship, singleness, marriage and parenting, bringing the many aspects of our life into spiritual focus. Life is not about money, success, and pleasure. Life, in all its dimensions, is about God. Marriage, parenting, rest, all have to do with God. We will not be given a spiritual assignment as homework; we will work out the problem here, in class. This will be labwork for the spiritual life.

As we begin, I must warn you of one thing: the spiritual life is a mystery. It cannot be reduced to a formula. We are speaking of a relationship that cannot be controlled, a journey that cannot be mapped, a life of many surprises, joys, and disappointments. In its essence, the spiritual life is a journey of the heart.

In *The Sacred Romance*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, p. 7), Brent Curtis and John Eldredge write: “The true story of every person in this world is not the story you see, the external story. The true story of each person is the journey of his or her heart. Jesus himself knew that if people lived only in the outer story, eventually they would lose track of their inner life, the life of their heart he so much desired to redeem.”

So in this series we will talk about our heart condition. Each one of us is on a journey of the heart, involving a deep yearning for intimacy. While no two journeys are alike, the goal for each one of us is the same—finding the heart of the Father, centering ourselves on his love, and connecting to him in the most intimate

way.

As we begin this series, we will examine the story of the prodigal son. We will take three Sundays to do this, taking a week for each of the three main characters in the story. This is a very meaningful text for me. Like no other Bible passage, this story draws me back to what is central in the Christian life, helping me shape my understanding of God. My prayer is that it will encourage us to re-center our lives on Jesus.

The context of this well loved story is our Lord’s receiving and eating with sinners. Luke writes:

Now all the tax-gatherers and the sinners were coming near to Him to listen to Him. And both the Pharisees and the scribes began to grumble, saying, “This man receives sinners and eats with them” (15:1-2, NASB).

In that society, sharing a meal amounted to sharing life with one’s guests. In the East today, as in the past, a nobleman may feed any number of lesser, needy persons as a sign of his generosity, but he does not eat with them. However, when guests are “received,” the one receiving them dines with them. Jesus was crossing cultural and religious boundaries by eating with sinners; perhaps he was even hosting them.

In response to Jesus’ hospitality, the scribes and Pharisees began to “grumble” about what he was doing. The verb, which is rendered in the present tense, means they were grumbling continuously. The word is used in Exodus 16:2 of the time when Israel was journeying to Canaan. Traversing through unmapped territory, they ran into trouble and began to long for the security of Egypt. To the Pharisees, Jesus’ eating with tax-gatherers and sinners in Samaria was like passing through unmapped territory. So, longing for the safety of religion and moral righteousness, they grumbled. The parables that follow, in verses 4-32, are a defense of Jesus’ actions.

The parable actually contains four stories of lostness: a lost sheep, a lost coin, and two lost sons. The stories spiral in intensification: a hundred sheep, and one is lost; ten coins, and one is lost; two sons, and one is lost; one son and he, too, is lost.

Let’s read the story together. Verses 11-24:

And He said, “A certain man had two sons; and the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the estate that falls to me.’ And he di-

vided his wealth between them. And not many days later, the younger son gathered everything together and went on a journey into a distant country, and there he squandered his estate with loose living. Now when he had spent everything, a severe famine occurred in that country, and he began to be in need. And he went and attached himself to one of the citizens of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he was longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the swine were eating, and no one was giving anything to him.

But when he came to his senses, he said, 'How many of my father's hired men have more than enough bread, but I am dying here with hunger! I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son; make me as one of your hired men."' And he got up and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him, and kissed him. And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' But the father said to his slaves, 'Quickly bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet; and bring the fattened calf, kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this son of mine was dead, and has come to life again; he was lost, and has been found.' And they began to be merry."

As the account opens, the younger of two sons asks his father to give him his inheritance. This was an unthinkable, unheard of thing in that culture. Such a request would warrant a beating, since what it was implying was that the son wished his father were dead. In all of Middle Eastern literature, from ancient times to the present, there is not one instance of a son, old or young, demanding his inheritance from his father.

Demonstrating tremendous love in his response, the father grants his son's request, although that might leave him without provision for his later years. The son sells everything while the father is yet alive, quickly disposing of his possessions—an action which may indicate the disapproval of the community. Selling off the family estate is never a small matter. The older son goes along with the arrangement. He does not protest or try to reconcile his father and his younger brother. His own relationship with his father may not have been everything it should have been. We can only imagine the anguish of this father's heart.

The younger son departs to a foreign country and squanders all his resources in wild living. There is little doubt that his activities involved prostitutes (verse 30). A lone Jew in a far-off country without money or friends would have been especially vulnerable in a time of famine. The young man is desperate. He joins himself to a "citizen." Perhaps this is a reference to the tax collectors and entering the service of foreigners. He feeds

pigs, an unthinkable task for a proud Jew. He is in desperate need. He has barely enough to stay alive, but no one gives him anything.

Bernard Bell told me that during his recent visit to Indonesia he learned that that country has but four months of food left to feed the entire nation. Street sweepers make just two dollars, plus ten kilos of rice per month, for their wages. They are not worried about finding fresh fruit and vegetables. For them, finding enough rice to feed their families is their main concern. It is difficult for us to imagine such poverty.

At last, the young man comes to his senses. He had left home to find freedom, but instead had found servitude—a bondage far worse than anything his father's hired men had to endure. He comes to a form of repentance, but he still has a plan to escape his dilemma. He will be a hired servant to his father. As such he will be a free man, with his own income, living independently in the local village. His social status will not be inferior to that of his father and his brother, so he can maintain his pride and independence. He will also be able to pay his father back. He wants to admit his failure, but he doesn't feel useless, because he knows his father can fashion him into a good workman.

When the prodigal arrives home, he is met with a remarkable welcome from his father and his servants. The father runs to greet him, and the son makes full repentance. Filled with compassion, the father presents him with a robe, a ring, and shoes. A great celebration follows, and the fattened calf is killed. The son will not be a mere servant; he will be a son once more. While the father did not actively seek for his son, as in the case of the lost sheep and the lost coin, he was looking, nevertheless, with passive energy. He probably had already decided how to respond in the event his wandering son returned.

The story of the younger son is a tale about leaving home and coming home. It is a story about a conscious act of rebellion. For many of us, leaving home is the action that shapes our spiritual story. Thus it is important to understand why we leave home, and what we are looking for. It is essential for us to put our rebellion in the context of the father's love.

We can garner a number of spiritual principles from our text.

First, we leave home in many subtle ways and travel to a distant country in search of life.

We leave because our hearts are restless, we have deep yearnings, and we begin our search for something or someone who will satisfy our longings. We leave home because we want to escape the control of others. We run away because we want to be free. In essence, we leave home because we have begun a search for home, a place where we can find rest, peace, and contentment.

This is why people are drawn to see the movie “Titanic” over and over again. Their hearts connect to that story, because they themselves want to embark on an adventure where love will touch their souls. Think of the outpouring of love last year following the death of Princess Diana. People related to the pain of her life and her journey to find happiness.

Our leaving may be a physical leaving, perhaps not, but in either case it is something that takes place in our hearts. The road we take is a spiritual journey, because leaving home is a manifestation of not being home. The journey is not just about bad behavior or reckless living, or about rebelling against our parents or society; it is about the deep things of the soul. We leave home searching for something that is already ours, but we just don’t recognize that fact. We have to see what is “out there.” We are surrounded by voices that make us restless and draw us away from home, with the illusion that they can offer us home and life. And so we try one thing after another, forever looking and searching. We become the prodigal son every time we search for unconditional love where it cannot be found.

As a college freshman, I took the fifty-mile trip from Omaha to Lincoln, but it might as well have been five thousand miles. That is how far my heart was away from home. I can identify with the prodigal. I too left home seeking something I could hang onto. I remember wandering the streets of Lincoln late at night, searching for what, I don’t know. I was afraid to go to bed because I might miss something that would soothe the ache I felt inside.

Second, there are many manifestations of not being at home that indicate we are lost.

Perhaps the best word to explain our lostness from home is addiction. The addicted life is a life lived in a distant country.

When we are addicted to sex, we are lost, because we are dependent on someone giving us something to satisfy our heart.

When we are addicted to drugs and alcohol, that is a sign that we are lost, trying to escape the reality of our world or the ache in our heart.

When we are addicted to our job or success, that is a sign that we are not at home; we are trying to earn approval and acceptance so that we can get home.

When we are addicted to wealth or greed, we are trying to gather things as a way of satisfying our soul; we are not at rest.

We can even be addicted to “doing.” We can’t handle solitude, and we crowd our schedules so that we will not have to face painful realities. Constant busyness is a sign of lostness.

We can even be addicted to ministry. Our sense of worth is so wrapped up in doing religious things that we do them for all the wrong reasons.

Every time we fill our lives with things other than God that is a sign that we are lost; we are not at home.

Third, the road away from home very often leads to death and slavery.

That is rather ironic, isn’t it? We leave home looking for home, searching for freedom, but we find the opposite. Slavery and death result because sin controls everything we do. Self-pursuit leads us on a path of ever-increasing darkness.

This is what we see in the story of the prodigal son. His journey led to a downward spiral that left him famished, without friends, food, or home. Quoting again from *The Sacred Romance* (pp. 61-62): “For the most part, we don’t see ourselves as people who are deeply committed to following the path to death. The way we want to live feels so right—so much like life—the only problem seems to be the way others treat us and God’s indifference to our pleas for help... The truth is, we all come into this world with a predilection to live life under our own terms and according to our own understanding.”

Fourth, the road towards home often begins with an impure motive.

The prodigal really had selfish motivations. Henri Nouwen writes: “He didn’t return because of a renewed love for his father. No, he returned simply to survive. He had discovered that the way he had chosen was leading him to death. Returning to his father was a necessity for staying alive. He realized that he had sinned, but this realization came about because sin had brought him close to death” (*The Road to Daybreak* [New York: Doubleday, 1988] 72).

Like the prodigal son, we too offer explanations for our behavior so that we can keep our sense of self-respect. On the way home, we have doubts as to whether God will accept us. But we still think we have something we can offer. We will make a bargain: we will be a hired servant. Complete repentance and belief in total forgiveness is difficult. It is hard for us to come to the place where we can say, “I’m sorry. Forgive me.” We insist in offering explanations for what we have done.

Fifth, the story of the younger son shows that because of the Father’s love we can return home anytime, anywhere.

The son began the journey home with an impure motivation. But his father did not require anything higher than this. His love was so complete and unconditional that he simply welcomed him home.

Again, quoting Henri Nouwen: “This is a very encouraging thought. God does not require a pure heart before embracing us. Even if we return only because following our desires has failed to bring happiness, God will take us back. Even if we return because being a Christian brings us more peace than being a pagan, God will receive us. Even if we return because our sins did not offer as much satisfaction as we had hoped, God will take us back. Even if we return because we could

not make it on our own, God will receive us. God's love does not require any explanations about why we are returning. God is glad to see us home and wants to give us all we desire, just for being home" (*The Road to Daybreak*, 72-73).

When the prodigal returns home, the father's actions are dramatic. He expresses an unfathomable love that protects his son from the hostility of the village and restores him to fellowship in the community. The father runs to meet him. How humiliating! A nobleman dressed in flowing robes would never act this way. The son was totally rejected in a foreign land but totally accepted by his father. The father kisses him again and again in a sign of reconciliation and forgiveness. He wants him to have the best robe, likely his own. We are reminded of the words of Isaiah, "For he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isa 61:10). The ring is quite likely a signet ring, which means he has complete trust in his son. The shoes that are given to the son are the sign of his being a free man in the house, not a servant; and the fact that the servants put the shoes on him indicates they accept him as their master.

We make a plan to be hired servants, knowing we are not worthy to be called sons, but God's love reaches out to make us sons and daughters. The Father's desire is for us to repent, not to become slaves, but full-fledged

sons. If we insist on doing anything, however, we cannot be regarded as sons. Sonship, the robe, the ring, the shoes, the party, all are God's gifts to us.

This story tells us that the Heavenly Father has a reckless, relentless, pursuing, searching, passionate love for his lost children. He wants us to come home! Imagine the father in the story waiting and hoping for his son's return. The first thing he did in the morning and the last thing he did at night was look down the road for any sign of his return. In the same way, we have a Father who is waiting for us to return. When he sees us, he stops everything he is doing and runs to us, accepting us with open arms. He doesn't tell us what we have done wrong, he doesn't hold grudges and resentments against us.

We leave home searching for home. We come home when we allow the Father to embrace us and call us his son, his daughter. Home is the center of our being where we can hear his voice, and believe him when he says, "You are my beloved Son. In you I am well-pleased."

The story of the prodigal is a story about coming home. On our journey we can find ourselves drifting away from God. It is then that we realize the importance of returning home again and again to our loving Father. This morning, I invite you to walk down the road that leads to the Father's love.

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